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ABSTRACT

New perspectives need to be gained on the roles of older adults and older workers in the new millenium. Because today's adult is healthier, policies concerning social security, retirement, and work need to be changed. There is a need for acceptance of various types of aging. Rather than mandating specific retirement, the individual should have more control over when he or she wants to retire. Old notions of senior citizens and demeaning stereotypes of older adults must be eliminated. Social constructionists focus on understanding and explaining the individual process of aging as influenced by social definitions and structures. Understanding the social construction of age will enable those who work with older adults to include various expressions of aging. Adult, continuing, and community education must incorporate these new ideas and examine their own ideas about aging and the older worker. The government's perspective of a social security system must be revamped. One suggestion is to create a national saving account for each individual used throughout his/her life focusing on medical needs. Older adults should be considered a viable part of the workplace. Policies should incorporate older adults into the regimen of the workplace. These new ideas will require ongoing learning and development that can be met through the practical ideas of adult education, workforce development, and higher education. (Contains 13 references.) (YLB)

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# Education and Today's Older Worker

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Education and Today's Older Worker

*There is a need for adult educators to incorporate the older adult worker in training, education, and learning. The purpose of this article is to summarize the new labor force especially in light of an aging population. Ideas on social construction of age, social security, and older adults are presented.*

One of the changes taking place in the workforce of western nations is that the worker is older. The purpose of this article is to present ideas concerning the importance of re-evaluating the laborer in light of a healthier older adult. Demographic change, the social construction of age, social security, and the older worker are discussed. There is a need for adult educators ranging from literacy to workforce development to incorporate the perspective of the older worker. We can no longer meet the demands of the future by focusing on young workers.

*Demographic change*

The increase in life expectancy is the most significant demographic change for citizens in the USA. By extending one's life, many people are living a full 25 more years, from age 60 to 85 in good health. Not only will this increase one's perspective on life, but also it delays the debilitating aspects of growing older. Because so many people are living longer, society as a whole must be prepared to handle an aging population. Many people dream of growing older by spending time in ecotourism, Peace Corps, or teaching, but no one wants to imagine an extended time of becoming frail and feeble. Another important consideration for society will be the ramifications of death and dying of the 82 million baby boomers. Some important topics are rethinking burial, cemeteries, and medical assisted suicide. Issues of spirituality, religion, and life beyond the grave will become common topics as the entire world helps to prepare the large

generation of Baby Boomers for death. Not only are boomers aging, but there is also a greater longevity among the very old, both of these contribute to the prediction that by 2030 one fifth of all Americans will be 65 or older (Rowe & Kahn, 1998.)

Our society has changed from agricultural to early industrial to late industrial to post-industrial. Even though there are stereotypes with each, the current post-industrial era is characterized by low death rate, longer life expectancy, and an aging population. The old age dependency ratio is increasing and will continue to increase for the next 30 years. Accompanying problems such as depleting funds for social security may lead to intergenerational wars (Longman, 1987). Previously, the dependency ratio has reflected needy children, however, the current change to the older person who has already lived their life may have a different effect.

The changing demographics of the population from young to old have been compared to a narrowing pyramid. This eventual beanpole of shifting demography reflects the increasing elderly population and the lack of people under 20 years of age (Quadagno, 1999). Boomers have also been compared to "a goat in a snake," when the snake eats smaller animals no one notices, but after the goat has been swallowed everything within the snake must make room for the goat. For example, within the USA, in 1900, 4.1 percent of the population was 65 or older, today 12.8 percent are 65 and older, and by 2030 it is estimated that 20 percent will be 65 or older. Various writers describe this as the python that swallowed a pig, regardless of the analogy, all aspects of the population will have to slide over, wait, or help this aging population.

Also the gap between genders may be slowly meeting, and this will change the entire scope of social issues. Instead of churches, retirement homes, and travel trips dominated by older women, there may be more of a balance of men and women. Remarriage may become

more plausible and realistic as the number of older men increases. Men may force society to consider longer periods of work, instead of early retirement.

Another changing role is the grandparent. Because of the shrinking size of the family, today's grandparent can focus their attention and benefits on fewer offspring. The result has been an evolving grandparent role, and a grandparent that is increasingly more active with this future generation. Grandparents are not just taking their grandchildren out to dinner, they are helping with homework, moving closer to grandchildren, going on trips to Europe, and even stepping in where they believe the parents may be deficient (McGuire, Boyd, & Tedrick, 1999).

As life expectancy increases, almost every aspect of the aging process will be affected. Retirement, programs for the elderly, life satisfaction, volunteerism, medicine, travel, education, exercise and nutrition will all be impacted as adults age from young-old, old-old, eldest-old, to greatest-old. Because of the increasing demands and sheer size of this older population, the rest of society and especially the taxpayer will also demand correct numbers and accurate accounting, and issues in gerontology will become more important.

The aging population will defy stereotypes, and the rest of society will focus on a more scientific approach in order to handle the aging segment of the population. It is imperative that we practically address the changes in our population by incorporating and acknowledging the older adult. An important consideration will be how we define or construct age.

### *Social Construction of Age*

Social construction involves the subjective meaning attached to human behavior. We are active creators of our own reality by disclosing personal intentions, motivations, and actions. From this perspective, sociologists consider the individual's process of interpretation as a

significant framework for age. Social construction can become a larger force when there are collective thoughts through families, neighbors, or communities (Quadagno, 1999.)

This past century we have witnessed various ways age has been constructed. At the turn of the century a newborn boy could hope to live to be 47 if he was healthy, whereas today, a newborn boy can hope to live to 76. Regardless of this advancement in age, the radical social elements of the 1960's told us not to trust anyone over 30. Ironically, a young 15 year old may feel like an old man during an illness, and in contrast today, there are numerous 80-year-old women with medical intervention who have gained a new lease on life. Age has become a guessing game, with grandmothers having children, cosmetic surgery, and subtle hair dyes. People are involved in negotiation and discourse on the social meanings of age. Rather that idly sitting by watching the years accrue, people are active participants in the construction of their own social world (Quadagno, 1999; Rowe & Kahn, 1998.)

Defining age is a complex issue and is better understood when considered from four perspectives; these include chronological age, social roles in age, functional age, and subjective age (Quadagno, 1999.) Similarly, another perspective of age would involve chronological age, cosmetic age, biological age, psychological age, social age, and economic age. It is important to consider how each person, family, community, and society constructs their own individual and unique meanings of these terms. This social phenomenology helps us to appreciate and understand the varieties of ways age is constructed around the world. For example in the USA older women are experiencing a new lease on life, whereas in the Balkans a widowed woman usually wears black the rest of her life. "How old are you?" may be the most common question in the world, yet meanings of age are constructed around each society. For example, a 50-year-old man from a western country may be married for the first time, but in South Africa when one

is 50, society expects he should be a grandfather. In a large city a 35-year-old woman hope to have her first child, whereas in a rural town within the same state, a 20-year-old is expected to begin a family. In many western countries someone may not be considered old until they are frail, yet the Inuit Eskimo is considered old at 50 when he can no longer hunt for whale. Among the Black Caribe of Belize, menopause is considered the mark of old age, yet in many western countries post-menopausal women are experiencing a vigorous life (Quadagno, 1999; Hawes, 1986.)

Social construction represents an analysis on the micro-level and includes the social behaviors of the individual within their society. Age cannot be known or understood without the symbolic interaction of the issues of age, and the phenomenology of what age means for the individual. Sociologists who consider themselves as social constructionists are focused on understanding and explaining the individual process of aging as influenced by social definitions and social structures. An example of this is the labels we attach to aging, such stereotypes as asexual, dependent, or absent-minded can be better understood as a reflection of our society's attitude toward aging. Understanding this construction can also help the learner to understand how social reality shifts over time, reflecting the differing life situations and social roles that come with maturation (Bengston et al. 1997.) A more accurate picture of the older citizen reflects a sexually active group, those who desire independent living, and have taken necessary steps to remain active.

Social construction takes into consideration how individuals are participating and making meaning in their everyday lives as well as the accompanying norms and sanctions. Within the multidisciplinary setting of gerontology, this approach compliments the diversity of issues in

aging and is easily adapted for research. However, this perspective may complicate macro level effects such as age stratification, cohort influence, and social power (Bengston et al. 1999).

The social construction of age also includes the life course of the individual. For example, one person who participated in a research project said, "I never felt old until I was about 80." She further reflected, "...and I never really felt old until I felt pain." For her, being old was constructed around the issue of pain. After recent water aerobics therapy she has reconstructed her age, "I feel great!" On a larger scale, in this century researchers have introduced such terms as adolescence, mid-life, young-old, old-old, and eldest-old as we have learned more about the unique construction of aging. A sociocultural perspective on aging will include the influence of one's society and particular culture. Rather than singling out one's genes, or internal physical changes, the sociocultural perspective of aging will incorporate how the individual is defined by its particular society. Various factors that can determine age would come into focus such as gender, wealth, physical attributes, and ethnicity (Baumgartner & Merriam, 2000.)

Understanding the social construction of age will enable those who work with older adults to include various expressions of aging. Adult, continuing, and community education needs to incorporate these new ideas and continue to examine their own ideas about aging and the older worker. An important consideration for each society is how they will take care of the older generation.

### *Pertinent issues of Social Security*

There are several concerns about Social Security that need to be addressed. First of all, Social Security was introduced in 1935 partially as a result of the Great Depression in order to help provide a security for people in the future. Contextually this helped to alleviate concern

over the future, yet may no longer be appropriate for the context of the year 2000. Rather than seeing Social Security as sacrosanct, the taxpayer needs to reconstruct this helpful, but outdated system.

Several faults with the system are that the individual immediately loses control of the 7.65% of their payroll, allowing the government to manage this money at its own discretion. Instead of allowing each person to keep or manage their savings, this money is designated for current needs and assumes that future workers would always be able to supply the deficit. Forecasters of future trends predict that the aging of the Baby Boom generation will deplete all of the monies in these trust funds by the year 2032.

One of the components of successful aging is that people desire to stay active and busy, and that high level of activity leads to high life satisfaction (Rowe & Kahn, 1998). Also, many retirees are returning to work or to part time work to replace the boredom of inactivity that may accompany retirement. One immediate solution based on activity theory would be to encourage the worker to stay active by raising the retirement age, or the benefits age to 75. In addition, there should be a willingness to change and revise this system based on current contexts rather than remaining focused in the past. Instead of the mindset of the welfare state of the 1930's, it is time for new ideas considering the current world. For example Longman (1987) points out how today's elderly are retiring earlier yet living longer than any generation in history. The average age of retirement is now 62, while life expectancy has increased to 77 for men and 82 for women. Various predictions seem to avoid the financial status of the USA economy and the potential to repay all of the national debt within 15 years. For example, the pessimistic doom and gloom of Longman's article (1987) seems out of sync with revision in welfare distribution and

the growth of the economy since the early 1980's. Yet Quadagno (1999) acknowledges that there have been substantial financial gains in the elderly population in the last 20 years.

Assuming that people desire to continue to work (Activity Theory) and that the year 2000 demands a revision (Social Contextualists), I recommend the following: First, raise the social security benefits of retirement to age 75. Second, employers continue taking 7.65% out of wages earned. These matching funds by the employer will be set aside for the assistance with poor, low income, and disabilities. Third, allow each person to direct and control his or her fund when it begins and to contribute more. Each new born will have their own personal account set up by the government. This money should have two main functions: medical insurance and pension. Privatization of this money will encourage individuals to be more responsible (Quadagno, 1999). Fourth, special tax incentives will be given to those who are taking advantage of situations in order to improve health and overall life. In addition, special tax breaks will be given to those who are in non-wage work situations, such as childrearing and care giving. Fifth, the wealthy will be required to forego social security and designate to which program they can contribute their money including trust funds that can be used by their grandchildren.

These suggestions reflect people that are motivated to remain active, that each person is more concerned about their unique future than the government, and the context of today's world. Other important considerations or tax breaks should be granted to those families who assist with the needs of the elderly. Tax breaks should be granted to non-profit groups and organizations that give help to the elderly.

These measures may prevent the predicted intergenerational inequity, and by understanding the overall dependency ratio, the impact may not be as negative as some predict (Kingston, Cornman, Hirschorn, 1986.) Baby Boomers may be prepared to instigate these

changes; it is predicted that this generation will receive the largest financial inheritance in history (Kingston, et al, 1986.)

Social Security has been one of the outstanding social programs of the USA government. It keeps almost 40% of elderly out of poverty and saves tens of thousands from having to depend on their children for support, and it is also a major source of income for orphans, widows, widowers and disabled (Quadagno, 1999). Although this is important, there is an obvious opportunity for improvement.

In summary, there needs to be a change in the current social security system. In light of activity theory and social context, today's active adult should be viewed in today's world. The flaw in social security is its focus on the elderly; the real issue is any person in need. For example, the USA's problem of childhood poverty should not be overlooked in light of taking care of the elderly (Longman, 1986.) All generations have a common stake in social policy; this new perspective should reflect interdependence and reciprocity (Kingson, et al, 1986.) We need a social insurance program for each person required and regulated by the government, yet managed by the individual. Social security is a readily accepted norm in our society. Rather than turning over this important percentage of pay to the government, it is time for adult education to train workers how to plan, invest, and keep their hard eared wages for the future.

Also, keeping the aging adult employed rather than retired is a viable option.

*Older persons in the workforce*

Older citizens should be encouraged to remain in the workforce for a longer period; in addition there is a greater need for a different paradigm concerning age and work. There are several compelling reasons for change, first of all the retirement age has remained fixed despite the leaps of improvement in physical and intellectual vigor of the elderly. Even though America

is graying, one segment of this population that has been overlooked is the elderly person who continues to work. It seems that we focus on the elderly traveler, the busy retiree, and the applauded volunteer, rather than the older worker. The youth oriented concepts of work formed during the Industrial Revolution fostered the ideas that work by older adults is either unnecessary or undesirable (Morris & Bass, 1988.)

These concepts may have worked for Germany in the late 1800's but must be revised to fit the context of 2000 (Dychtwald, 1999.) Morris and Bass (1988) discuss how most younger adults anticipate a time when there would be less labor and more leisure. However, some retirees miss the pattern of work, social connections, and contributing to society. Many older retirees don't know what to do with this free time and many attempt to return to work. In our post industrial society there will be a greater need for a service information society that reflects jobs that the elderly could easily fill. There needs to be a redefinition of work in the postindustrial age of the elderly. For example, short-term jobs centered on skills of the elderly such as working with children, volunteering, mentoring, as well as specific jobs can offer a simple solution for the aging worker. Baby boomers may be more willing to work the rest of their lives; rather than looking for free time, this group is more conservative than once thought (Alwin, 1998.)

A radical new idea for the new century is that leisure and retirement could be spread throughout one's life. Rather than waiting until 65 to enjoy life, one suggestion is to rethink, recreation, leisure, as well as the workweek. Why not continue to work the rest of our lives, and create more leisure earlier in our lives. For example, retirement and the five-day workweek are old concepts and need to be rethought with longevity and new types of jobs. Mannell (1993) discusses how life satisfaction is directly linked to the way one is satisfied with their choices of leisure. Learning about leisure, and the incorporation of high quality leisure across the lifespan

will add to life satisfaction. Some suggestions are four-day workweeks, two-month vacations, and six-month sabbaticals every five years. Let's spread leisure throughout the lifetime, instead of lumping it all into the last unpredictable 15 years of life. Why should someone be forced to retire from a job that enjoy when they can continue working?

Anyone who can look like Sean Connery, sing like Lena Horne, fly in outer space like John Glenn, jump from an airplane like George Bush, win a presidential election twice like Ronald Reagan, oversee the national economy like Simon Greenspan, or volunteer like Jimmy Carter are examples of older people who are breaking stereotypes and are contributing to society (Dychtwald, 1999.) This new wave of energetic older adults is not ready to retire; rather they are creating a "middlescence," a transition into the older years. Staying active is an important and essential part of aging; therefore, the older person should be encouraged to remain in the workforce as long as possible. (Simon-Rusinowitz, Wilson, Marks, Krach, Welch, 1998.)

Remaining in the workforce will help older people feel they are contributing to society, but with reduced time and greater time off they can still have a great deal of leisure and recreation. The focus of older workers could be that of mentoring younger workers during shorter time frames and possibly retiring around 75-78; this phased-in retirement is a practical solution for the aging worker (Dychtwald, 1999.) Another plus will be the extra income needed for the baby boomers (Simon-Rusinowitz, et al., 1998.)

*Summary*

The new millennium has brought forward a host of ideas. Many people enjoy seeing older audlts that are healthier because it also gives them hope for the future. However, there is a need to gain new perspectives on the role of older adults as well as the role of the older workers in this new millennium.

Because today's older adult is healthier, there is a need to change various policies concerning social security, retirement, and work. First, there is a need for acceptance of various types of aging. Rather than mandating specific retirement, the individual should have more control over when they want to retire. We must do away with old notions of senior citizens as well as demeaning stereotypes of older adults. The government's perspective of social security system must be revamped.

One suggestion is to create a national saving account for each individual to be used throughout their life focusing on medical needs. Older adults should be considered a viable part of the workplace. There should be policies that incorporate older workers into the regimen of the workplace. These new ideas will require ongoing learning and development, which can be met through the practical ideas of adult education, workforce development, and higher education.

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